

WOMENKIND

Sisters are doing it for themselves ... but are they doing it for each other?

WORDS CHELSEA ROFFEY

Cliques, competitiveness and queen bees are unfortunate features of growing up. But when women adopt the characteristics of mean girls, instead of setting examples of support and encouragement, the future of womankind looks decidedly grim.

Janine Garner, a business advisor, founder of the Little Black Dress Group network and author of *Who You Know* (Wiley, \$27.95) says in a cutthroat world, seeking the competitive edge is a human trait that can bring some nasty behaviour to the surface, but women can be particularly harsh in judging themselves and others. It's a critical pattern that regularly sabotages success and erodes confidence, leaving many women feeling uncertain about how to surround themselves with the right people and attitudes to get ahead in life.

"We don't believe we're good enough, we don't believe we deserve the same pay, we don't believe we can speak up and play in the arena with the boys," says Garner.

"The stay at home mums judge the working mums, the working mums judge the stay at home mums. We comment unconsciously about how people look. Are you married, are you not married, are you divorced, are you living here, are you going to that school? These are acts of judgement that exist in society and, [often] unconsciously, women play that game.

Garner is on a mission to shift from a culture of "ladder kickers" - women who have achieved success but are quick to protect their own interests when threatened - to one that recognises the power to do and be more when we work together.

She says mutual exchange, sponsorship and support for one another takes a massive

shift in mindset, but the personal and professional payoffs are immeasurable.

Dr Winfried Sedhoff, a general practitioner and author of *The Fall and Rise of Women: How women can change the world* (Amazon, \$25), agrees that we can be our own worst enemies. He says many of his clients deal with stress and despair while pursuing the prestige of a bigger mortgage or better car, worrying about being judged, or simply being too busy to put their own needs before those of others.

The pressure to be perfect can lead to the false belief that everyone else is doing well and you are struggling, he says, but tapping into encouragement rather than competition can have a profound effect on every aspect of life. The sooner we learn to connect in positive ways, the better.

"Supportive networks are a powerful resource for positive change. Someone in your group may know three others they connect with. One of those [people] may know 10 or 20 more. When you share your ideas, thoughts and solutions among your network they can quickly spread," Dr Sedhoff says.

Is it time you started embracing the women around you with kindness and connectedness?

CONDUCT A SELF-INQUIRY

Self-compassion is a powerful precursor to building meaningful relationships, as cultivating kindness, respect and support for yourself naturally leads to outwardly exhibiting these traits with others. It also gives you a deeper understanding of your desires and motivations, helping to connect you with people who will enhance your experience of life.

Dr Sedhoff encourages clients to connect with their inner nature through meditation and reflection.

"You can access this caring nature, explore it, [and] question how it affects your life by connecting with your inner self - learning to be quiet of mind, and getting to know what feels true for you deep inside,"

he says. "With a caring heart you will naturally want to be more supportive and encouraging [of others]."

Choosing to connect with your true self eases the relentless pressure of living up to the roles and expectations of wearing multiple hats. While there will be times when you simply have to fake it 'til you make it, Garner says there is an incredible sense of lightness to be gained from dropping the façade.

"Things will flow much easier when you're being you," says Garner. "We've got to remove whatever headwear we're putting on to protect ourselves. The only thing that is unique is each and every one of us. If we can fully embrace that, we're able to create impact. The more we can be ourselves, the more impact we can each have in our day to day work and in our dealing with every single person we come across."

REWRITE THE RULES

Authenticity leads to openness and, as Garner has discovered, being true to yourself not only enhances the interactions you have - it also plays a vital part in shifting culture towards a more friendly and empathetic space. Instilling her own 'personal rules' in the workplace gives others permission to challenge expected norms and form a more supportive environment.

For instance, when one of her children phones during an important meeting, she always answers the call.

"The CEO will look shocked and after I put the call down, I'll say 'I'm really sorry but I made this commitment to my children that I will take their calls whenever they ring.' Interestingly, it opens up conversations about their kids and it's beautiful seeing that change," says Garner.

"Only if we can walk the talk of being a successful professional woman in business - who may or may not have children, and may or may not be wearing multiple hats - can we show through our own behaviour that things can change."

GIVE EVERYONE A BREAK

Fear of weakness or inferiority drives envy and disconnection from others. But Dr Sedhoff says the more we understand our own underlying struggles, the more we are able to put ourselves in another person's shoes.

"How much better would you feel if you were in their circumstance, perhaps alone, vulnerable, struggling, and someone offered you encouragement and support?" asks Dr Sedhoff.

Building bridges of tolerance and empathy leads to networks, friendships and ideas, and Garner says its time to push past the unconscious judgement that we all have.

"If you think we don't, I literally challenge people to look at a front cover of a magazine and a picture of Posh Spice or Angelina Jolie or Kim Kardashian," suggests Garner. "How many of us unconsciously go, 'Of course they look like that, they've got all the help!' That's part of it, and that judgement filters down into the schoolyard with my daughter. Children pick that up. People are watching us when we don't think they are."

BE A TRUE FRIEND

As the saying goes, five true friendships represent a life well lived. But how often do you spend time - in person - connecting with those nearest and dearest to you? And how often do you surround yourself with people who make you a better person?

"Human beings are made to be social. Often we try to use wealth as a substitute for friendship, to buy our way out of trouble and do things our

way or on our own. This just leaves our lives hollow. Social networks can fill the part of us in order to experience strong friendships. Acknowledge the other person's right to a differing opinion. Approach conflict with curiosity rather than blame. Defend her. Offer to help - and mean it.

"If we are among those who believe in us, respect us, and want us to achieve our best, our own self-worth can soar. If we are among people who respect themselves, we are likely to do the same," says Dr Sedhoff.

REACH OUT

When Garner walks down the street, she smiles at people. When she gets into a lift, she starts a conversation.

"People smile back ... and they talk back," she says. "I make sure I learn with every interaction. I have a belief that people come into my life every day and everybody can teach me something. Equally, my role is to give something, too."

In a world obsessed with to-do lists, emails and meeting Key Performance Indicators, the power of people to connect meaningfully

is so often lost. But Garner says igniting our networks unlocks our potential.

"We have an incredible capability to support each other to not just be more, but become more," she says. "It's like a ripple effect. You throw a stone into a pond and it becomes a wave."

The foundation for satisfying relationships, families and lives extends to our communities and our futures, adds Sedhoff.

"Daughters can learn to feel empowered and confident from strong women role models, and learn they are valuable and cared-for human beings. Sons can learn the value of respect, support, and encouragement themselves, especially of women. It can help determine how men and women get along for generations to come."

Who knew? Embracing the "kind" in womankind could take our selves to brave new levels. 

